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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Forty-Eighth session
Agenda item 11

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Written statement submitted by Pax Christi International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV)

[23 August 1996]

1. Discrimination against women due to their gender or stereotypes created by society is still a current practice requiring attention and efforts by the international community, in order to be eradicated. Particularly, the issue of practices affecting the health of women and children is at the centre of our concerns. An information campaign on this matter must be undertaken; as the Special Rapporteur, Mrs. Warzazi, indicates in her report (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/6): this would enable women in remote areas to have access to data or contacts with the "outside".

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2. We must not forget that traditional practices affect not only women but also young girls: early marriages make of them premature wives and inexperienced mothers, thereby leaving them no time to live their youth. Excision can leave lifetime trauma and abortion can induce psychological troubles.

3. We believe that the role of education in preventing these harmful practices must be emphasized. By informing and educating, it is possible to convince not only women but also men, political leaders and government officials that women endure practices that may leave permanent physical, psychological and moral scars on them. Many countries have already launched training courses or seminars for women to acknowledge the fact that their human rights are violated. Furthermore, a few countries have introduced sex education in their curricula and mentions of traditional practices affecting the health of women and children in books. Education will also lead women to equal access to jobs, higher education possibilities, dignity, recognition and respect. We appreciate the fact that the Sub-Commission examines these issues and has nominated a Special Rapporteur, who not only embodies the qualities representative of the United Nations but also those of a woman. We hope that this will give the victims the image of a successful and helpful ally.

4. The international community must be mobilized to protect women's human rights and to ensure that these harmful practices do not affect their health - or their lives. Indeed, "educate to respect" seems essential, respect not only in behaviour but also in use of language.

5. As to the implementation of the human rights of women, we are also convinced that education is the answer: educated women should be asked to train other women and girls. They could inform and assist women in countries where help is still needed for women to accede to their human rights or in areas where women's human rights are violated or denied. This calls for a large amount of understanding on the part of the trainers and suggests that it is time for transition. It is equally important not to take away any socio-cultural or traditional elements from these women's lives and to clearly explain that human rights enable them to choose their lifestyle and undergo no pressure.

6. Care should be taken to avoid ethnic hatred and the social disruption that it could bring about. That is the reason why we deplore that some cases of regression are to be noted. In Ethiopia, for example, cross-ethnic marriages were natural, normal and positive factors in the process of building a peaceful society. In the present situation, however, under the declared ethnic federation, women who had willingly entered into cross-ethnic marriages and their children are the primary victims. They are forcefully displaced and their husbands harassed. This situation can be witnessed in many regions where multi-ethnic coexistence prevailed in the past. The suffering of these women is a symptom of the consequences of ethnic intolerance. If ignored, this warning sign could end in massive vengeance.

7. Women are due respect and are entitled to human rights. Although their interests may differ, men and women are equal. The implementation of the human rights of women is a justified procedure and should be supported by the international community so as to secure women's future - and thereby the future of all of us.

8. We trust that the Sub-Commission will undertake a thorough study of the traditional practices affecting the health of women and children and will adopt the necessary measures to promote respect for women and for their human rights.